



How Can We Be So Hurt By Our Partners When They Behave Without Malice?

Mitchell Milch, LCSW

If I've witnessed it once I've witnessed it a few hundred times during my years counseling couples. One partner reacts as if his self worth has been decimated by words or actions originating from his partner. The curious and perplexing aspect of observing this process unfold, relates to specific instances when from my perspective evidence of anything that smacks of criticism or judgment is as detectable as an evaporated water spot on a shirt.

This brief article discusses the imperceptible shifts that can take place between partners that explain how one partner ceases to use and value his autonomous self to relate to and process his partner's communications and then, blames the partner for feeling useless and worthless when an emotional crisis is precipitated. Such a crisis is borne of disappointed expectations shaped by lessons learned at the knee of caregivers that have curiously stood the test of time despite being invalid and unreliable. To illustrate this theme I offer a clinical illustration. The spouses are composites of patients I have worked with over the years.

Sheila had reached a crisis in our couples work with her husband Jim. She was in the estimation of both her husband and myself despite her denials to the contrary, re-living apprehensions that Jim would abandon her as did her father when he joined Alcoholics Anonymous, divorced Sheila's mother and for all intents and purposes discarded his hats as husband and father in one fell swoop. Why were these apprehensions coming to the fore when they did, and why couldn't Sheila see them for what they were, shaped her ultimate vulnerabilities to feeling at the mercy of an alleged phantom attack at the hands of her husband.

Sheila's father had, prior to his AA recovery activities, submitted to his wife's wishes to dominate him in the same manner that Jim had permitted his wife to dominate him before and during a period of time he was unemployed and depressed. Now Jim was employed

and growing in self respect for himself as a direct consequence of individual psychotherapy sessions with myself. His burgeoning comfort with standing up to Sheila's efforts to control his self expression had quickly stimulated unconscious associations to her father's path out the door of her life. Sheila was in denial that her mind was trying to fit a round peg of the current circumstances into a round hole of her past recollections. She was most uncomfortable with not knowing what the future held for them as trusting her self to adapt accordingly was more responsibility than she bargained for.

The most glaring symptom of devaluing her self was that Sheila had ceased to ask questions and actively clarify with Jim what he was saying and doing and what he intended by his words and actions. Anything incongruent with what she believed to be true based on her own internally generated perceptions were dismissed and discarded as inaccurate and/or disingenuous. Sheila had her husband all figured out and yet, it seemed pretty obvious to Jim and myself that whomever Sheila was relating to was not the Jim he understood himself to be, or I understood him to be. Sheila had lapsed into mind reading however, the only mind she was reading and relating to were parts of her own inner world of internalized relationships now projected onto her husband and confused with the husband in the room.

Sheila's unconscious mind increasingly took a stranglehold on how she perceived reality and constructed meaning. Jim grew in self assurance and increasingly presented himself as the master of his own ship and not to be controlled. Sheila became passive as if not to rock the boat and drive her husband out, as she feared her mother had done to her father once he was sober, had a support system, and no longer needed her mother to enable his alcoholism. It was as if Sheila progressively became passive as if to say "please don't leave me with mom." During Sheila's childhood she and her father found in each other solace and comfort as both shared the experience of having been bullied by Sheila's mother. Sheila had learned early in life that weakness and vulnerability invited exploitation, so the more she identified with the little girl who feared abandonment the more she denied her weaknesses and vulnerabilities that inhibited her self assertiveness. These recollections were not accessible for discussion as Sheila's capacities to make space, observe herself, think about her feelings and reflect on them, had temporarily disappeared. During childhood her mother had not tolerated Sheila's strivings toward autonomy. These strivings were considered to be disrespectful and an attack on her mother's self worth. In Sheila's confusion between the past and the present, she denied her anxieties around expectations that she might be manipulated by myself and her husband as she had been by

her mother, and to a lesser degree by her father, who recruited Sheila to join him and covertly defy and oppose her mother through acts of omission.

Sheila's defenses against anxiety became less mature as she regressed to defend against the specter of her husband leaving her. Adults behaving like children are less likely to be left by disgruntled spouses than adults behaving like adults. Such is the power of guilt. Sheila with little if any awareness of her evolving emotional crisis began to idealize what she had learned to expect as a little girl. To escape her terrifying weaknesses and vulnerabilities Sheila identified with the recollected mother of her inner world. This way Sheila could feel close to her mother, experience her support, forgive her transgressions, and invest herself with the authority she felt was slipping from her grasp, as the passivity reminiscent of a childhood organized around pleasing her parents took hold of her. This unconscious metamorphosis meant creating and exploiting an experience of being wronged to justify making demands of her husband. Cast in her mother's perfect self image Sheila was to be the architect of her own victimization, deny responsibility for the consequences of her actions, blame the actors cast in her historical enactment, hold a grudge, and then, demand that justice be served. All that was needed was a pretext for this morality play to be repeated.

Sheila victimized herself at the hands of Jim's brother Tom who was not to be trusted or relied upon to be respectful and considerate of himself or anyone else for that matter. Unfortunately, in this case neither Sheila nor Jim actively processed what might happen and how they might feel in doing business with Tom. However, Jim was able to accept responsibility for his decision and separate himself from his brother's unjustified, disrespectful and inconsiderate actions. Sheila could and would not.

When Jim's brother Tom tried to help them buy a kitchen appliance through his company but, could not deliver the model Sheila desired, she bought it elsewhere with Jim's blessings. Tom was at first accepting of this disappointment after doing what he could to help his sister in law and close a deal for himself. Later however, he disparaged his sister-in-law to the rest of his family as having selfishly used him. This was Tom being Tom. Sheila told Jim that until Tom apologized (which was unlikely to happen as Tom milked the role of victim as readily as Sheila did), she would not attend any of his family's functions under any circumstances. Sheila's self worth at this point was completely invested in the idealized wish that her husband would come to her rescue and choose her over his family

unlike how her father had chosen his AA fellowship over his mother and herself. It was Sheila's turn to turn the tables and step into the shoes of her mother whose sense of entitlement was entirely linked to real and/or imagined experiences of being treated unfairly and unjustly. The need to rely on such leverage was evidence of how undeserving Sheila felt in her own right to begin with. Sheila's mother was not one to forgive and move on. Now Sheila, the self styled victim who under ordinary circumstances still felt like a hostage of her mother's demands to be pleased at Sheila's expense now felt empowered to collect her emotional debts with interest. Many of the unpaid debts I'm referring to were the unpaid debts for sacrificing herself at the hands of both parents that she never forgave, which had nothing to do with what Jim owed her under any circumstances.

Getting what Sheila demanded was unreasonable, unrealistic, disrespectful and inconsiderate of Jim and yet she pursued her agenda with a desperate vengeance. Jim was compassionate and empathetic towards his wife and validated her perception that his brother had done her wrong. However, she was putting him in the middle between herself and his entire family by asking him to choose. Sheila would not listen to reason and would not consider Jim's desire to attend his brother Harvey's birthday party at which Tom would be in attendance. She would not listen and process any proposals that respected and considered both of them including Jim putting his family on notice that if anything was said during the event that might potentially embarrass Sheila, they would leave immediately.

A life's worth of accumulated rage, hatred, vengeance and anger was bubbling to the surface for Sheila and she was not inclined to look at, think about and try to understand what piece of history was being enacted here. Jim told Sheila that her position was not acceptable to him and Sheila looked as if Jim had just taken an ice pick to the heart of her worth as a human being. When I asked Sheila to take some deep breaths, step back and reflect on what she just heard that was so wounding to her, Sheila accused me of abandoning her and left in a huff. Jim wound up staying with me in individual psychotherapy and Sheila was supported to find another therapist for herself.

This vignette illustrates how unsubstantiated yet idealized expectations can precipitate an identity crisis, so that when these expectations are disappointed, can leave the author of such expectations with the experience of his self worth having collapsed like a house of cards. Nothing is left. When Sheila could not replay history with her wished-for "happy ending," in a moment of gratifying vindication she gifted her husband and myself her

feelings of worthlessness and uselessness and attempted to disconnect from both of us by walking out like her father had on her mother and herself. She temporarily rid herself of needing either of us. By not getting what she demanded, Sheila had nothing to show for her complete and utter sacrifice and devaluation of her self except to exact revenge.

Sheila desperately tried to get the outside world to conform to her internal expectations based on history. Necessity being the mother of invention Sheila regressed to a stage of magical thinking, desperate to be all knowing and all powerful in the face of apprehensions that should her husband not dance to her tune, she would be left feeling as useless and worthless as the day her father left her. Her idealized expectations were all she had left to protect herself from what she imagined would be a fatal wound to her self worth. This bright and competent adult had become fearful of annihilation as if her valued identity was inextricably tied to enacting history with a different outcome. From the perspective of Sheila's inner child, what she got or didn't get is what she deserved and what she deserved put the final nail in the coffin condemning her to be punished as a bad little girl. Her badness was nothing more than the fear and dread of what her unconscious hostilities toward her parents had done and might continue to do to kill off love and concern for her as a separate person. She had never learned to own and use these feelings constructively, as her recollections were rich with lessons that her mother would attack her if she asserted herself and her father would behave as if he had been killed off.

This article discusses the mechanisms by which one spouse may experience another spouse as having the power and authority to attack and rob him of his self worth. The alleged victim is in truth, a victim of his own complete identification with idealized, unprocessed, archaic and illogical expectations which when they are not validated are experienced as an annihilation. These are cases of complete absence of malice on the part of the accused. Implicit in the disappearance of autonomous thought processes is the temporary disappearance of capacities to regulate self esteem. Thus the alleged victim who is emptied of self worth in obligatory self sacrifice to the falsely idealized partner, and whose value depends on controlling how the partner responds to himself, feels like nothing when his expectations are frustrated and disappointed. A false dichotomy is set up between being all knowing and all powerful, and being powerless, useless and worthless.